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Review of "We are a College at War: Women Working for Victory in World War II"

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Mary Weeks-Baxter, Christine Bruun, and Catherine Forslund, *We are a College at War: Women Working for Victory in World War II* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010. 237 pp. \$29.95 Cloth ISBN 0-8093-2992-1).

The 1992 film, *A League of Her Own*, introduced into American culture a vision of ways that U.S. involvement in World War II affected the lives of American women. Told partly through a focus on the Rockford Peaches, the first professional women's baseball team, the film depicted the disruptions, as well as the opportunities opened to women by men's absence and the American mobilization. This dramatic and largely romanticized story nonetheless introduced new characters to the history of women and World War II, with the professional baseball player taking her place alongside Rosie the Riveter, the industrial worker, Eleanor Roosevelt, the activist and internationalist, and the pin-up girls and mourning mothers left waiting on the homefront. As the example of the Rockford Peaches, pin-up girls, and Rosie the Riveter suggests, American memory of World War II has largely been shaped by images perpetuated through government propaganda and popular media. Even Eleanor Roosevelt used her newspaper columns to speak to the American public about the responsibilities of individuals and government during the Depression and war, in the process helping to craft her own public image and inspire other women.

We are a College at War, based on newly collected memoirs and personal reminiscences, attempts to add complexity and substance to these media representations and to consider how media – both government issued and popular press -- influenced expectations of women in the 1940s. Drawing heavily on the stories of individual women, the book provides an interesting account of the many ways in which students, staff, and alumnae of Rockford College, a small women's school located about fifty miles north Chicago, responded to the U.S. entry into war in 1941. The book is impressively researched, using newspaper articles, student and alumnae publications, oral history interviews and written reminiscences. A comprehensive bibliography and historiographical essay point to sources many will find useful in their own research and teaching. An accompanying website <weareacollegeatwar.org> promotes the book and gives viewers access to some of the materials, including letters and scrapbooks shared by alumnae, now part of the Rockford College archives. The activity of students, alumnae, and staff at Rockford is contextualized within the broader American women's history, with personal accounts balanced against discussion of society's changing expectations for women especially ideas about women's responsibilities within the public and private realm.



In its wealth of personal stories and historical narrative, *We are a College at War* both complements and diverges from previous treatments of the wartime activities of American women. The book reinforces the narrative of sacrifice and service; at the same time it recognizes how the nation's involvement in the war became a 'crisis of opportunity' that expanded the role of American women. *We are a College at War* includes some now familiar and important stories about women's entry into the WAC, WAVES, and other branches of services. Other women joined the Red Cross, helped staff local daycare programs and free area women for paid employment, and participated in cooking classes and other efforts to educate the public about rationing and conservation. Rockford College had its own corps of Rosie the Riveters, women students who enrolled in the College's Earn and Learn program where they combined part-time studies with paid work in defense industries, earning money to pay for college and supporting the war effort.

Produced by three current and emerita faculty from Rockford College, not surprisingly the authors transmit a sense of pride in Rockford, its students, and its legacy. Nor is this pride unjustified for, as the book shows, numerous Rockford women, impelled by a desire to do their part for the country and their loved ones, volunteered and served in myriad ways. Along with personal motivations, women students were inspired by the legacy of alumna Jane Addams, founder of Chicago's Hull House settlement and an outspoken promoter of the idea that women – particularly those privileged by higher education – should play a public role as social housekeepers and activists addressing urgent social needs. Addams was a pacifist who had opposed U.S. entry into World War I. Nonetheless, Addams' ideas were activated in support of the cause, especially through the speeches of President Mary Ashby Cheek who urged students to show "unity, sacrifice, determination, energy, and loyalty" in joining the war effort. (p. 8)

The book's coverage extends beyond familiar forms of war mobilization to look at ways students and faculty adapted campus and classroom activities to build concrete support for the international effort and to increase students' understanding of subjects that would prepare them to be more active citizens during and, especially, after the wartime emergency ended. The presence of refugees, including Jewish faculty from Europe and Japanese American students released from internment camps in the West to enroll at Rockford, helped make the war visible and raised new topics for class discussion. The College increased its connections to the local area, as students left campus to work and volunteer throughout the area. Even without mention of the Rockford Peaches, the array of off-campus activities is impressive, including the work of students at area farms and daycare centers and their enjoyment of dances and entertainment at the USO club serving nearby Camp Grant. Rockford College developed new curriculum in nursing, which became popular among the students, expanded its emphasis on physical education, and



collaborated with the Illinois Institute of Technology to create a mechanical engineering program. This new engineering program brought the first male students to Rockford, a harbinger of a more permanent change that occurred when the College ended its women-only status in 1955.

While the stories of individual women during the war effort are one of the book's strengths, the larger impact of wartime changes on the College and its alumnae are less fully described. Specific initiatives at Rockford are detailed, such as the new outreach efforts and the curricular programs mentioned above. It is hard to discern, however, if these initiatives resulted in broader or lasting transformations of Rockford and its mission. How did the engineering or expanded nursing programs fit with the College's mission after the war? Did the connections with farmers and off-campus social service organizations continue even without the war to motivate students to volunteer? Indeed, did the spirit of volunteerism demonstrated by students survive after the emergency ended? And in terms of the war's impact on students and alumnae, a few stories are told of their engagements in postwar relief and resettlement efforts along with the work of two women who remained very active in community politics in the States. But what about the longer impact on others?

Overall, *We are a College at War* succeeds in uncovering many ways that Rockford women responded to the calls of their college, and their country, to support the war. Documenting the range of their responses, this book enriches historians' understanding of the war era and provides a useful case study. By broadening the lens to consider the ways college women acted, saved, gardened, served, nursed, tended, labored, and promoted their own work and the larger cause of victory, the book suggests possibilities for similar research – and maybe similar collecting efforts -- at other schools and other locales.

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